Staring Down the Brilliant Dream

By: Suzume CA

Yamiberry Book III - Navigating the perils of romance is difficult enough: what happens when you mix in school politics, organized crime, and a pair of goddesses in crisis? Hazuki, Chikaru, Tamao and Kaname are about to find out. Rated M for language and adult content.

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Yamiberry Book III: Staring Down the Brilliant Dream

by Suzume CA

I open my hands up to see what I've got

My days slip like coins into a slot

They are gone - the shadows lie long

I've been banking on a broken machine

Left unattended like most of my dreams

Rusted components of an unmarked song

We've been staring down the brilliant dream

The sun burns our eyes

We've been fighting for the love of our lives

-Indigo Girls

Part 1: Afterglow

Hazuki was more than grateful to finally have the chance for some sleep, given the events of the day: it had been nothing *bad*, certainly, but had been more than enough to leave her with the pleasant exhaustion of time well lived. Now, here at the tail end of it all, was the time for pleasant darkness, warm covers, her ridiculously soft mattress, and some good old-fashioned log-sawing rest.

Somewhere in that liminal space between awake and asleep, however, she felt the mattress dip as another occupant slipped under the covers, so it would appear that Hatsumi had other ideas.

This was confirmed moments later as a very soft, very warm, and very feminine shape cuddled into her side, and she felt the other girl's breath tickling her neck. "Good evening, Hazuki-chan."

Hazuki could not help but smile in response to Hatsumi's mischievous tone. "Evening. Back again, I see?"

"It's an awfully big bed for just one," Hatsumi giggled. "It would be a shame to waste all this space." Even saying this, though, she was taking up as little of that space as possible, choosing instead to wrap herself closely around the taller girl.

"A shame indeed," said Hazuki, slipping her arms around Hatsumi's warm shape. It did not take long for her hands to verify that Hatsumi was naked, and the feel of her skin sent electrical pulses through Hazuki's nerves. "You know, we have *got* to stop meeting like this."

"I respectfully disagree," Hatsumi breathed in her ear, and a small hand slipped into Hazuki's pajama top. "And I daresay you do, too?" she smirked as her fingertips glided along the curve of Hazuki's breast and found an already-stiffened nipple.

Hazuki took a quick breath through clenched teeth. Yes, it was definitely going to be one of *those* nights.

Apparently no longer content with simply feeling her up under her bedclothes, Hatsumi swung one leg over Hazuki's hips and sat up, straddling her, letting the covers hang from her shoulders like a tent. As the blonde's hands busily worked the buttons of Hazuki's top, Hazuki herself looked up at the other girl's exquisite form, all smoothness and curves and radiant beauty. Before long, Hazuki felt the slightly cooler air of the room against her skin as Hatsumi finished opening her top. Hatsumi smiled down at her with a mix of mischief, joy, and a very real hunger, and a moment later the world

was warm again as Hatsumi laid down atop her and met her lips in a wet, needy kiss.

She felt almost too light to be solid, befitting the unearthly dream she was, but there was no mistaking the feeling of her soft breasts pressing against Hazuki's own, nor the slickness of her tongue in Hazuki's mouth. In spite of her better judgment, Hazuki again wrapped her arms around the other girl, drinking in the warmth and passion, letting her misgivings melt away as she began to give as good as she got. Once Hatsumi moaned into her mouth, it was all but over.

Hatsumi broke from the kiss long enough to stare into the other girl's eyes for a long moment, then gave a wicked smile that Hazuki had well come to recognize by this time. The smaller girl's weight shifted, and Hatsumi felt that same warm hand dip under the waistband of her pajamas, then her panties.

She very nearly got the words out this time - "Hatsumi, maybe we shouldn't be doing this" - but then Hatsumi's fingers curled *just* so, and any words (and indeed any rational thoughts) were lost to a broken, throaty gasp.

Kaname awoke slowly, her mind well aware that she would not like what she opened her eyes to, even if her immediate memory was too foggy to put any names to the vague, shapeless dread. All she really knew was that sleep was the better option here. Hadn't she done enough for the universe to earn a little extra time away from the pain?

Unfortunately, the sound of someone knocking at a door brought her partway out of her haze, and the feeling of a warm feminine body disentangling itself from her finished the job. Her eyes popped open, and she found herself looking at an unfamiliar wall in an unfamiliar bedroom.

"Someone's at the door," said Ryofu, rising from the bed and crossing into Kaname's field of view. The great general was dressed only in boy-shorts and a loose crop-top that showed *far* too much underboob for Kaname to be able to appreciate in her current state, and for a moment, Kaname could only gape at the intricate tattoos which covered much more of Ryofu's body than she would have expected.

As Ryofu disappeared from view, Kaname did a frantic self-inventory. She, too, was barely dressed, clad in only the sport bra and panties she had been wearing under her costume the night before. The pirate outfit in question was in a small, neat pile on top of a nearby dresser, and it was at that moment that Kaname put two and two together and realized she was in Ryofu's cottage.

More specifically, she was in Ryofu's *bed*, and she was pretty sure that the other woman had been spooning her up until the knock at the door.

Kaname made a move to push herself up to a seated position, but she felt pain lance through both arms as her hands pressed against the mattress. She looked down at them, and her eyes widened as she took in their bandaged state.

That was when everything she had been trying to sleep through came crashing through her consciousness like a freight train losing its grip on the rails. Hoshi-kun.

Hoshi-kun was dead.

Hoshi-kun was dead, and in her fury and terror, she had beaten her hands to a pulp on a heavy punching bag, until Ryofu had found her, stopped her, and… what? She didn't remember anything past that, but obviously it involved dragging Kaname back to her cottage, bandaging her hands, and at the very least stripping and spooning her.

Had they had sex? Kaname desperately hoped not. Not that Ryofu wasn't fifteen different kinds of hot, of course, but that would… *complicate* things, to say the very least, and anyway, Ryofu didn't really seem the type to take advantage of someone in a blackout state.

(And anyway, if she had had sex with Ryofu, she probably would have wanted to remember it.)

It suddenly occurred to Kaname that a knock at the door would mean a visitor, and for her to be found here in this state would do a lot more than simply *complicate* things. "Ren, wait!" she cried, launching herself out of bed, through the door, down the unfamiliar hallway and into the living room…

… just in time for Ryofu to open the front door.

"Um, good morning, Ren-san!" came a familiar voice, its cheerful tone sounding a bit forced, possibly due to Ryofu's state of dress. "I'm sorry, did I wake… oh!"

The visitor looked past Ryofu, and her violet eyes locked with Kaname's. For a moment, time stood still as Kaname weighed her relief that it was only Tamao against her panic that… well, it was still *Tamao* .

For her part, Tamao looked Kaname up and down with wide eyes, then turned back to Ryofu and did the same. "Oh!" she said quietly. "Um, I'm sorry to have intruded. I… didn't know that you two were… that you were…"

"We didn't have sex," Kaname blurted out, looking desperately to Ryofu for confirmation.

Ryofu nodded. "We were not affectionate with one another."

"I… see," Tamao nodded slowly. "Um, if this is a bad time, I can…"

"I will make tea," said Ryofu, nodding to the young Miatoran before shuffling off in what Kaname presumed was the direction of the kitchen.

"Um, I really *can* come back later," Tamao offered in the ensuing awkward silence.

"You may as well come in and close the door," Kaname sighed, bringing her hands up to rub her face. She hissed as this motion sent further dull pain shooting up her arms.

"Your hands!" Tamao gasped. In what was more or less a single continuous motion, she nudged the door closed, slipped out of her shoes, and crossed the short space between them to reach out for Kaname's bandaged hands, stopping just short of grasping them. "What happened?"

"Look, I… don't want to talk about it just now," Kaname managed. "I… kinda got hurt last night in the gym. Ren brought me here and… patched me up, and I ended up crashing here."

"You should go see Chikaru," said Tamao, her concerned eyes checking over the bandages. "She could heal this for you."

Even though Kaname knew that Tamao meant well, Chikaru was easily bottom three in the category of People Kaname Wanted To See Right Now (the others being Momomi and Hazuki), because with Chikaru, there would be Questions. "They'll heal on their own once my *Souma* kicks in," she said, flexing her fingers and grimacing. It hurt, certainly, but she could tell it was already a lot better than last night.

"Maybe, but still…"

"Suzumi-san," Kaname interrupted, "I know I'm not in the best position to ask this of you, but I need a favor. Two of them, really, and they're pretty big ones."

Tamao blinked at her, then nodded slowly. "All right."

"Thank you. I… really need a uniform right now. Could you..?" She started to say "get one from my room," but then she remembered the printouts and the note from her father, probably still on the floor where she had dropped them. If Tamao were to see those, then yes, there would almost certainly be more Questions…

A better solution came to her. "I left mine hanging up in the dressing room at the theatre. Could you bring it back here for me? And, maybe wrap it up, so it isn't obvious what it is?"

"But… why do you..?" Tamao started.

"Because if someone sees me making the Walk of Shame from Ren's cottage in my pirate costume, I probably get expelled, and she *definitely* gets fired." Kaname reflexively tried to run a hand back through her hair, but she stopped herself in time. "Please, Suzumi-san?"

"Um… of course," Tamao bowed slightly. "What… what was the second favor?"

Kaname closed her eyes and took a slow breath. "I need you to not tell *anyone* that you saw me here, and that *especially* means Hazuki or Chikaru." Here, she opened her eyes again and fixed them on Tamao. "Please, Suzumi-san, just… keep this between the two of us for now."

By the look on her face, Tamao still had no end of questions, but after holding the taller girl's gaze for a long time, she nodded once, her expression grave. "Very well, Kenjō-san."

"Thank you," Kaname sighed.

Without another word, Tamao put her shoes back on and showed herself out. Kaname collapsed on the nearest convenient surface

(which happened to be a sofa), and let out a sigh that was closer to a groan.

Moments later, Ryofu emerged from the kitchen, glanced around the room, then frowned.

"I… thought that Tamao *liked* tea."

It was sort of an unspoken tradition that the Mass the morning after the Cultural Festival was the most sparsely attended of the academic year. The nuns were never happy about it, and it gave a lot of people something extra for their next confession, but year after year it continued, with this one being no exception.

Members of the Student Council, however, had rotating duties to perform for the service, so Chikaru could not, in good conscience, miss it. Of course, thanks to her *Souma*, the lack of sleep was not a hindrance for her.

It was Sayuri's turn to take part in preparations, leaving Chikaru and Ayame to sit at their customary spot in one of the side pews. The Lulim class secretary, contrary to her president, seemed to be much less well-rested, stifling a few yawns as the cathedral slowly filled.

She also, Chikaru could not help but notice, had not stopped smiling since taking her seat. "Ayame-chan," Chikaru said quietly, pitching her voice to be inaudible to anyone else over the increasing throng, "I must say, you look like the cat that swallowed the canary."

Ayame's smile briefly turned to a grin, and she looked down. "I guess so. I'm just…"

"Happy the show was a success?" Chikaru supplied when Ayame did not continue.

"Oh, definitely that," Ayame nodded, starting to blush "but… um… it was also what happened… *after* that."

"After that?" Chikaru asked, arching her eyebrows.

"Well, yeah…" said Ayame, her face twisting between embarrassed and happy, with the latter winning the fight. "It's… how should I say it? You know how you always joke about your bet with Hanazono-sama? About being the only girl to graduate without being kissed?"

"Indeed..?"

"Yeah, um… I guess you could say I'm out of the running now."

"My goodness," said Chikaru. "Ayame-chan, is this something you should be telling me? In church of all places?"

"Sayuri-chan won't mind," Ayame giggled. "She knows I'm bad at keeping secrets. We actually had a bet going, whether or not I'd be able to resist telling you before Mass. I guess I lost that one, too."

"You don't need to tell me anything," Chikaru said, but then immediately made a liar of herself. "So… was that your first?"

"Well, yeah," Ayame shrugged. "It… just felt like the time was right, you know? A way to privately celebrate surviving the hell of pre-production. Something just for us. We may not ever do it again, but… I'm glad we did, and I'm pretty sure she is, too."

"But…" Chikaru started, but it took her a moment to find the proper words. "Do you have… those kinds of feelings for one another, Ayame-chan?"

Ayame shook her head. "Yes? No? Maybe? I mean, it just felt right last night, you know? One last punctuation mark on the most memorable day of our lives. Something nice to take with us, wherever we end up going in the future."

"I see," said Chikaru, making a liar of herself yet again. It sounded as though Ayame and Sayuri, for all the apparent spontaneity of their kiss (and had it just been a kiss?), were being very mature about

things here in the aftermath. But what to make of Ayame's attestation that it had probably been a one-time event? Were they resigned to the idea that they could not realistically stay together in the long term? Or could they really be satisfied with letting it simply be a happy memory between the dearest of friends?

Part of Chikaru wanted to ask more questions, as was her normal course of action, but to her disquiet, an even larger part of her did not. For all her alleged wisdom, she found herself blindsided by what she had just heard, and not for the first time, she felt like something of a fraud. When had everyone around her suddenly become the sensible ones?

The sound of the pipe organ saved her, though, calling them to rise as Mass began. "Well, then, congratulations on your punctuation mark," she whispered to Ayame before slipping back into Good Catholic Student mode.

Ayame, for her part, went on smiling dreamily.

It took longer than Kaname would have liked for Tamao to return, but at least that gave her time to convince Ryofu to put some clothes on.

It also, like it or not, gave her time to think more soberly about the previous night's revelations, and to ponder her next move… or whether or not she even had a next move to make. She knew that she was being threatened - there was no other way to interpret that note from her father - but what could she do about it without risking everyone around her?

Without risking Momomi, who unlike most of the others currently in Kaname's circle was all too mortal?

And yet, could she let herself do nothing at all? After Hoshi-kun had been killed in his attempt to escape their families' machinations?

After a while, Ryofu went outside to "feed the animals," whatever that meant, leaving Kaname to sit there on the couch in a borrowed robe, trying with little success to calm her whirling thoughts. There was no way she was going to solve it all this morning, and if she kept trying like this, it was only going to drive her to do something stupid. *That* was something she *definitely* could not afford.

Finally, Tamao returned, carrying a school bag containing Kaname's uniform and shoes. She then excused herself to join Ryofu outside while Kaname got dressed. Once she was back in uniform and had re-packed the bag with her costume, she finally felt her blood pressure begin to settle a little. After a few more deep breaths to center herself, she went outside as well, finding the other two on the back porch giving treats to what had to be at least half a dozen cats.

She struck a weak pose. "How do I look?" she asked in an equally weak attempt at humor.

Tamao looked over at her, studied her briefly, then nodded. "Normal."

"No bed-head?"

"Not so much, no."

"Good, good." Another deep breath. "We should probably leave together, you and I."

"That makes sense."

"And… would you mind carrying the bag, in case anyone saw you bringing it?"

"I can do that."

Tamao was looking at her with an expression that seemed to be trying a little too hard at being neutral, but it was still obvious that she wanted to know what the hell was going on. For a moment, Kaname felt kind of bad for her: she didn't deserve to be cleaning up one of

Kaname's messes like this. It also occurred at that moment that out of the Great *Souma* Threesome, Tamao was the only one with whom Kaname had never had an antagonistic relationship.

Wrenching her mind back to task, Kaname gave a small bow to Ryofu. "Ren… thank you for taking care of me last night," she said, holding up one bandaged hand for emphasis. "It would… probably be best if no one knows I was here, though."

Ryofu nodded. "Come find me if you need me." She then looked up at Kaname, and her normally impassive eyes were intent on the Spican girl. "If not, I'll probably find you."

Kaname was the first to look away. "Yes, well… thank you again. Suzumi-san?"

" *Hai,"* Tamao sighed, rising to her feet and absently dusting off her uniform skirt. "Thank you again for yesterday, Ren-san. I'll come for a longer visit soon."

"We'll be here," said Ryofu with a small, soft smile.

With that, the two students headed off, making their way wordlessly toward the main campus. For all the awkwardness, though, Kaname couldn't think of much to say. "So… what brought you out to Ren's place today, anyhow?" she offered.

"I wanted to thank her properly for helping Kagome," Tamao replied. "Also… I love cats. She said I could come by anytime to pet them."

'Ahh," Kaname nodded. "I'm kind of surprised you came alone, though, to be honest."

"Well… Hazuki-chan's a little wary of cats. She doesn't hate them, as such, but apparently her sister used to take in every neighborhood stray, and sometimes poor Hazuki-chan felt like they had it in for her."

Kaname almost managed a laugh at the image, but then it struck her that by "her sister," Tamao was referring to Eve, or Naoko, or whatever she'd called herself in Hazuki's original world (something-tsumi?). Even now, after all she had seen, how bizarre it was to think that Hazuki had actually been the sister of a goddess…

… hang on…

"Kenjō-san?" Tamao said suddenly.

Kaname's train of thought screeched to a halt. Tamao had stopped walking, and was very pointedly not looking in Kaname's direction. "Suzumi-san?"

In a slow, measured voice, probably like the one she used when reciting her poems, Tamao spoke. "I won't tell Hazuki-chan or Chikaru about what I saw this morning."

"Thank-"

"Let me finish, please," Tamao interrupted her. "I want you to know that I hate the very idea of keeping secrets from them, particularly since I don't understand what happened in the first place. Obviously you don't want to tell me, and that's fine, but I need you to be aware of how much you're asking of me."

"I-"

"I am also going to have to lie to Nagisa-chan when she inevitably asks me why I wasn't at Mass today, and that does *not* sit well with me *at all* ."

This time Kaname waited for an actual pause before she spoke. "I'm sorry. But thank you: I do appreciate it."

"Now… Hazuki-chan in particular is very fond of Ren-san. I won't say protective, because we all know that she can protect herself, but… if you and Ren-san are doing anything… *secret* together, I'm very

worried that Hazuki-chan might be hurt, and I don't want there to be any wedges driven between the people I care about."

Kaname let out a sigh. "Suzumi-san, I promise you that I am *not* putting any kind of a move on Ren. I know I have a well-earned reputation, but I'm serious about this monogamy thing now, honestly." She then chuckled. "Besides, if I *did* try anything with Ren, I have a feeling I wouldn't survive the experience."

"Perhaps not," Tamao agreed, smiling faintly.

"Look, I don't want to drive any wedges any more than you want them driven," Kaname went on. "Let's just say… that I legitimately hurt myself in the gym last night, and Ren took care of me, like I said. That's all."

"But… that *isn't* all, is it?" Tamao asked quietly.

Kaname said nothing. This girl was getting to be as perceptive as Chikaru. Or had she always been?

To be honest with herself, she had never really noticed Tamao up until the dragons had come calling: the younger girl had either been an anonymous underclassman from Miator, a love-struck remora attached to that Aoi girl, or an equally love-struck devotee to the Cult of Hazuki. It was hard to remember sometimes that Tamao had been a legitimate Étoile candidate who, as Kaname had later discovered, would have won the title had it not been for Shizuma being Shizuma.

And, to be honest, she probably would have been a damned good one.

"I won't press," Tamao said at last. "We need never speak of this morning again. But that being said…"

Here, Tamao finally looked Kaname in the eyes. "Even though I won't tell them about any of this, in the end it may not be up to me. We share ourselves every day, and you know as well as I do that

sometimes memories can leak through. They may find out whether I tell them or not, and then not only will they want to know what happened to you, but they'll probably wonder why I kept this from them in the first place. So again, I need you to know exactly what it is you're asking of me. Along with that, you should probably start thinking about how you *will* explain this if it *does* eventually come out."

Kaname held her gaze, and then once again found herself looking away first. "You know… you're a pretty damned impressive person, Suzumi-san," she smiled wryly. "Would it be okay for me to call you Tamao?"

"You have before."

"Yeah, but I don't know that I ever really asked to. You can call me Kaname, if that helps."

"Of course you can," Tamao nodded. "I… don't know that we even *get* to keep secrets any more, Kaname-san, given what we've become. Just… please think about it."

"I will," said Kaname. "I'll tell the whole story at some point. Just… not yet." Not until she figured out a way to take care of things without putting anyone else in danger for her screw-ups.

"I'll look forward to it, then," Tamao said with a small bow.

Kaname nodded absently, wondering if she really should ask the next thing. "So… as long as I'm asking unreasonable favors of Tamao, would it be possible to add one more?"

"I suppose that would depend."

"Are you still in contact with Lilith?"

Tamao frowned. "She comes to give me lessons sometimes. We don't have any sort of a set schedule, though."

"Sounds about right," Kaname sighed. "The next time you *do* see her, though… could you please let her know that I really need to talk to her about something?"

When at last Hazuki's breathing and heart rate had returned to normal, she found herself wanting to once again just let go of her thoughts and drift off into the afterglow. Hatsumi would be gone when her alarm went off in the morning, and she would go on with her normal routine, with none the wiser. It would be so easy to just fall asleep, warmed by the girl curled against her, lulled by her slow, even breathing.

This time, though, she couldn't let herself off the hook so easily. "I'm going to break up with Risa-chan," she said into the silence.

Hatsumi stirred, and pushed herself up to look into Hazuki's eyes. "Why?" she asked, looking surprised and a bit troubled.

"I… just think she deserves better than me," Hazuki sighed.

"Hazuki-chan, that's silly," Hatsumi chided her gently. "You have so much to-"

"I'm just *saying*," Hazuki interrupted her, "that maybe she deserves better than someone who keeps having these vivid dreams about fucking her dead sister night after night."

Hatsumi looked aghast, but said nothing, so Hazuki finally let it all out. "I mean, what the hell is *wrong* with me? I may not remember you, but I've seen the pictures and the videos. I know you were adopted, but we were *still* raised together! We were sisters in *all* the ways that matter! What kind of utterly fucked-up person am I to want this? What kind of horrible… *filth* is in my subconscious, that I keep conjuring up something this twisted, and then *enjoying* it when I do?"

She closed her eyes against the brimming tears. Even in a dream, somehow she didn't want Hatsumi to see her cry.

After a long silence, she felt gentle fingers wiping the tears from her face, and when she opened her eyes again, she saw Hatsumi smiling serenely at her. "Well… as a denizen of that subconscious of yours, would you like to know what I think about all this?"

Hazuki nodded, but said nothing.

"You say you don't remember me, Hazuki-chan, but we both know that isn't entirely true. Even with your memory wiped clean after the accident, you saw me before our parents showed you the pictures and the videos."

"Before I woke up in the hospital," said Hazuki. "You were there in the darkness, holding me. You… brought me back to life."

"That's a very sweet way of saying it, Hazuki-chan. Thank you."

Hatsumi shifted slightly, so that she was no longer lying against her, and Hazuki rolled to her side so they could continue to face one another through the darkness. "But think about this," Hatsumi continued. "You awoke to a new world with no memories, no connections, and a life that needed to be rebuilt from scratch… except for that one image of someone who loved you very much, and wanted to take care of you.

"Then you once again met Risa-chan, who had the most adorable crush on you even before the accident. You remembered yourself enough to know that you were partial to other girls, but for all the wise-senpai bravado you showed with her, you still didn't fully know what your feelings meant." Hatsumi's smile took on a slightly impish quality. "So you read some books and stories, you looked at some rather interesting pictures and videos, but… you were still confused, and rightly so: this sort of thing can be overwhelming and scary long before it becomes pleasant and fulfilling."

"I… don't want to mess things up with her," Hazuki said in a broken voice.

"Exactly," Hatsumi nodded. "Hazuki-chan, it's perfectly normal for a girl your age to be having these sorts of fantasies, but as the gallant senpai you want so badly to be, you couldn't bring yourself to have these dreams about Risa-chan. And so, needing an outlet for your curiosity, you conjured up the only other person you could trust with something so intimate. The *very first* person you knew and trusted in your new life. So, you see… there's nothing wrong with you *at all*, Hazuki-chan."

"Really..?" Hazuki whispered, wanting desperately to believe it.

"Nothing a bit of elementary psychology couldn't explain," Hatsumi winked. "And do you want to know what else I think?"

"Please."

Hatsumi shifted again, this time to prop her head on one hand and smile down at Hazuki. "I think that this is the last time you're going to have one of *these* dreams," she whispered, and for an instant, Hazuki thought she saw a flash of sadness cross her sister's face before the smile settled in again. "You may still dream of me, and I hope you will, but… I don't think you need the memory of me to help you discover yourself any longer. You know who you are and what you love, and I do hope you'll take that to heart with Risa-chan. Now that you've given yourself a taste, you can take your time and find out if this is something you want with her, and if it's something she wants with you… and perhaps you can find something truly special in your future together."

"Do you really think so?"

"I do," said Hatsumi, but there was a strange heaviness to her words. "Meanwhile, though, you have school tomorrow, and we've interrupted your rest enough for one night." She leaned in and kissed the taller girl's forehead, and suddenly Hazuki felt very tired indeed.

"Good night, sweet Hazuki-chan," she heard as she quickly faded. "Give Risa-chan my love. More importantly… give her yours…"

Lilith followed the sound through the endless stacks of the Great Library, treading as quietly as she could so she could focus on its source. In the end, it was no surprise which section she found herself in.

She found Eve curled on the floor at the foot of one of the bookcases, a single open volume next to her. The life-giving goddess was sobbing quietly, hiding her face in her arms, shivering and naked on the stone-tiled floor, with her golden hair spilling around her in every direction.

Lilith crouched down and picked up the book, quickly recognizing it as Hazuki's birth-world (*their* Hazuki, at any rate). She laid her hand against the open page and closed her eyes, feeling for its recent history. When she had seen enough, she closed the book and sighed heavily.

"What have I done, Lilith?" Eve whispered.

"You messed up," Lilith said quietly as she put the book back on its shelf. "Hopefully *this* Hazuki will do a better job getting over you."

"Lilith…" Eve trembled, "what's happened to me? What's *wrong* with me?"

"I don't know," Lilith sighed, kneeling beside the other goddess and softly stroking her arm. "Whatever it is, though, we'll figure it out, okay?"

"I don't deserve you," Eve sobbed. "I don't deserve Hazuki-chan, and I don't deserve you…"

"And yet here I am," said Lilith. She was tempted to add "Just like I was for ten thousand years," but now was not the time to rub salt in the wound. Instead, she pulled her sister and wife and lover into her lap, and just let her cry. There would be time for figuring out how to get her out of this self-made tangle soon enough.

And the sooner the better.

Next: Bold of you to assume I have a plan…

AUTHOR'S NOTE: What the hell am I doing even